



## Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive

---

News Center

News Articles Collection

---

2015-08-10

# Alumna's homeland security lens began with inclusion of people with disabilities into the conversation

## Center for Homeland Defense and Security

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/51003>



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

# Alumna's homeland security lens began with inclusion of people with disabilities into the conversation

 [chds.us/c/item/2536](https://chds.us/c/item/2536)

With a lifetime of experience and 13 years on the job with the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities, Center for Homeland Defense and Security master's degree alumna Angi English has an important message for emergency managers and policy makers.

Historically, our social construction of people with disabilities is that we've held individuals and groups on the outside of emergency management and homeland security discussions because "we want to take care of them and consider them vulnerable." "Ditch the paternalism and foster inclusion," said English. "Once you make the social connections and foster inclusion, you'll understand that people with disabilities bring a wealth of information, creativity, resiliency and know-how to the table."

Having worked with people with disabilities for several years, her personal experience and education gave English broad insight into the homeland security enterprise as she researched her master's degree thesis, "[People First Homeland Security: Recalibrating for Community Collaboration and Engagement within a Homeland Security Ecosystem](#)." She is applying her thesis beyond her current profession as she speaks at conferences and writes informative blogs on the issues of the day.



"I used the words 'People-First Homeland Security' in my thesis title based on my experience in the disability community with 'people-first' language," English noted during a recent interview. "In this context, it means seeing the person before the disability. It humanizes a person who is experiencing a disability and doesn't label them by a medical diagnosis or a piece of equipment they use to get around. In the context of homeland security, I wanted to make the point that everything we do and all the programs we develop are based on the dynamics of people."

Realizing that vision means policy makers rely less on top-down planning and more on bottom-up solutions. In English's view, the homeland security ecosystem and the challenges it faces are far too multifarious to be neatly wrapped into neat stacks of data and pre-packaged emergency plans. Rather, most everything in homeland security and terrorism can be explained and explored from understanding the psychology and sociology of people. Today, people are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in the ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations. The ability to act in concert and in public has powerful implications for the way we socially construct the future homeland security ecosystem.

"I was interested in exploring ideas that would move us from the current linear, military, top-down, mistake-driven social construction around systems and organizations to an ecosystem approach that is driven by people – not only people within DHS, but understanding the people-dynamics related to those that DHS serves, like the community, and tries to understand, like terrorists. To understand issues in terrorism such as radicalization and its social influence, we have to understand the sociology of groups. The same goes for understanding resiliency in communities in disasters: we have to study the sociology of behavior in groups."

"In the homeland security context, we can try to eliminate terrorism by drone bombing leaders, but the underlying

root causes like poverty, flawed ideology, ego-driven leaders, disenfranchisement, and lack of equal rights are some of the sociological issues that drive people to radicalization,” she said. “The problems that the homeland security ecosystem faces are so full of complexity on so many levels that the traditional response of gathering data and identifying cause and effect never seem to be enough to address the challenge.” We reach a cognitive threshold when the world becomes so complicated that we can no longer reason our way to solutions. The tendency then is to just kick the can down the road to the next generation of problem-solvers.

English went on to explain that this is partly due to the time-distance between cause and effect and the human dynamics that get layered on in the process. Root causes to complicated problems, sometimes called “wicked problems” are often intertwined with many other problems. It’s for these reasons and more that the more diverse the community of problem solvers, the better, because the solutions to complex problems lie in cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives.

As a practical metaphor from healthcare, English explains the concept of root cause analysis of problems such as malaria: We can treat the symptoms with medication for long time periods, or we can treat for the mosquitoes carrying the disease and the stagnant water in which they reside.

Moreover, many people with disabilities in the community exhibit traits such as creativity and resilience that policy makers could learn from in crafting people-first approaches. That creativity and resiliency has led to innovation in many ways, she said, as people with disabilities must navigate a world that is built for able-bodied people.

Planners and policy makers, however, have tended to view this community in a paternalistic way that neither listens to its insights nor capitalizes on its talents. Because people with disabilities have often been held at bay, their important subject matter expertise when it comes to disabilities and fostering resiliency is not included in the conversation.

“This social construction has to change,” she said. “The one piece of advice I’d like to see carried forth by emergency managers and homeland security professionals is to include people with disabilities as equal partners at the planning tables in the homeland security ecosystem.”

As with so many professionals who gravitate to the social sciences and disability field, English’s career path began with personal experience. Her younger brother had Down’s syndrome and her adult stepson has multiple and severe disabilities resulting from an early childhood traumatic brain injury. “My family survives and is resilient because we have a diverse team of five attendants who come into our home and help us navigate everything from the daily routine, to accessing all the needed auxiliary services for our son’s quality of life, and ours,” she said.

The Texas Governor’s Committee on People with Disabilities advises the executive office and promulgates policy recommendations each biennium to the Office of the Governor and the Texas Legislature on issues and trends on disability issues, she said. The committee helps provide information, referral and community engagement opportunities. It also works with other state agencies and task forces on various topics, including access, communication, education, emergency management, health, housing, recreation, transportation, veterans and workforce.

English’s position involves plying the same kind of traits that are nurtured by a CHDS education, such as critical thinking and policy development.

“The key point here is that good policy is based on good data,” she said. “We examine data from a variety of sources including surveying the public on what are the issues and possible solutions to challenges. Another key point here is that good policy is also based on diversity of thought. It’s important that policy is drafted from diverse stakeholders.”

With her CHDS degree in hand, English has continued her education independently, blogging on varied topics at Medium .com and occasionally speaking to classes at the Center.

She found an enthusiasm for blogging, which began as a required activity in CHDS instructor Rodrigo Nieto-Gomez's class, and has continued her blog as an outlet allowing her to write on an array of homeland security topics. Continuing her research and writing reinforces her firm belief in organic homeland security building, to which her education at CHDS plays an important role.

"For me I am more convinced than ever that after CHDS, there is so much potential to change local, state and national policy related to resiliency and community engagement based on the available social capital of the American waiting to utilized," she said. "One strength of the program is the diversity of people and the careful matching of people in the cohorts. The real magic of innovation and creativity is incorporating diversity of thought into the educational process. And although my past experience has mainly been in the disability world, the [Master's degree in Security Studies](#) from the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security has provided me the skill sets to explore other avenues of homeland security."

English's Medium.com blog can be found at <https://medium.com/@Carolinagal14>

---

Watch Angi English's related July 2014 video from [Viewpoints in Homeland Defense and Security](#):

[Copyright/Accessibility/Section 508](#)